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# LACUS FORUM XXXVII

**COMMUNICATION AND COGNITION:  
MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES**

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IX



Meaning &  
Translation





# HOW TO THINK ABOUT MEANING, AND ABOUT TRUTH

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**Abstract.** In reaction to the objectivist approach to truth, Saka proposes a subjectivist account which claims that truth and falsity are like sentences, statements, and beliefs themselves – products of agent subjects and ultimately grounded in some subject’s beliefs. The position defended in this paper is that, while such an account is adequate for the analysis of meaning, it poses problems for the understanding of truth. Saka demonstrates that subjective attitude-conditions can handle types of natural-language utterances which are unmanageable for a truth-conditional theory (e.g. puns, paradoxes). It is argued here that truth-conditional semantics represents the wrong kind of objectivity, in that it reifies both the utterance and its meaning; attitude-conditional semantics rightly re-introduces the speaker and the thought-content of the utterance into the discussion. This provides an adequate approach to linguistic meaning, which is concerned with the immediate cause of the speaker’s use of certain linguistic signs, this cause being the speaker’s view of the situation. However, by completely subjectifying meaning, it severs the relation between mind and reality. This paper utilizes the concept of intersubjectivity proposed by Artigas as the basis of the human ability to communicate by means of language, i.e. our ability to know reality in the same way as other human beings do, which explains the convergence of individual subjectivities observed in human communication. It is concluded that since both meaning and truth are intersubjective, they are reflections of a convergence between subject and object.

**Keywords:** Truth, Meaning, Objectivity, Truth-conditional Semantics, Logic, Semantics

**Languages:** (none)

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THE IDEA FOR THIS PAPER came from a comment by Paul Saka on a paper dealing with reductionism in linguistics, in which I criticized generative grammar’s treatment of semantics for dealing with sentences as having meaning defined in terms of truth-values independently of any context of utterance (Duffley 2009). In that paper I allowed for some exceptions to the rule that most natural-language sentences cannot be determined to be true or false without taking into account the situation in which they are uttered and the intention of the speaker who produced them, giving as an example statements of the type illustrated by (1).

(1) Water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen.

Paul Saka pointed out that even a sentence such as this could be used to assert a number of different things: the predicate could be intended to convey either the idea of ‘consisting strictly of hydrogen and oxygen’ or that of ‘consisting of hydrogen and oxygen among other things’; the subject could be used to refer either to tap water or to the pure chemical compound  $H_2O$ . In the case where the subject referred to tap

water and the predicate denoted strict composition, (1) above would be false, as the liquid we drink from our taps includes, along with hydrogen and oxygen chlorine, fluoride, microbial matter, and many other things we are perhaps better off not being aware of.

And these interpretations are only some of the possibilities. If contrastive stress is taken into account, the messages conveyed by the sequence of words in (1) above could range through the following:

- (2) a. Water has this composition, but hydrochloric acid does not.  
 b. Although you seem to have forgotten this basic fact, it is still the case nonetheless.  
 c. Water is not simply a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen.  
 d. Water is not composed of nitrogen and oxygen.  
 e. Water is not composed only of hydrogen.  
 f. Water is not composed of hydrogen and helium.

Whether (2a) is true would depend not only on the truth of (1), but also on whether whatever the speaker is contrasting water with is not composed of hydrogen and oxygen. (2b) implies some prior doubt, memory loss or assertion of the contrary of (1). (2c-f) are similar to (2b) in implying denial of some prior or implicit assertion which is in opposition to (1).

Such uses illustrate the fundamental unsoundness of the type of objectivity exemplified by truth-conditional semantics, which treats sentences as abstract objects whose meaning can be defined by means of truth-conditions, a position which assumes that “the analysis of truth need not make essential and explicit reference to some subject who thinks about truth” (Saka 2007:236). Saka pleads in favour of “explicitly incorporating into our analysis of language the subjects who speak, hear, and otherwise use it” (Saka 2007:5). Since a sentence does not exist in the abstract, but is always the product of a specific act of language carried out by a specific speaker at a particular time, it would seem reasonable to at least investigate whether the situation of utterance and the speaker’s intentions have some impact on the message conveyed.

Not only does truth-conditional semantics objectify sentences, it also objectifies sentence meaning. By defining the latter in terms of truth-conditions, it identifies meaning with the way the world must be in order for the sentence to be true of it. As I pointed out in my 2009 paper, this has the unfortunate consequence of making the meaning of even the simplest sentence into an infinite set of situations, as any sentence can correspond to an endless multitude of slightly different scenarios. The introduction of possible worlds is meant to capture this diversity, but it merely displaces the problem into the realm of possibilities, which are also infinite.

In reaction to the objectivist approach to meaning and truth, Saka (2007:252) proposes a subjectivist account:

The objectivist conception claims that every proposition is either true or false (or neither) regardless of what anyone thinks about it, and that we possess the

power to speak of such truth-values even if we can't always ascertain them. The subjectivist in contrast claims that truth and falsity, as predicates of sentences, statements and beliefs, are just like sentences, statements, and beliefs themselves: they are products of agent subjects and hence are ultimately grounded in some subject's beliefs.

The position which I will defend here is that while such an account is adequate for the analysis of linguistic meaning, it poses serious problems for the understanding of truth.

Regarding meaning, the job of the linguistic semanticist is to explain why the speaker chose certain linguistic signs in a given utterance and not others. It seems obvious that the answer to this question is that the linguistic forms chosen signify the way the speaker has thought the content of the message that he wishes to convey. Whether the way he sees things is the way they really are is irrelevant to the task of explaining why he talked about them the way that he did. Of course, things are a bit more complex than that. In some cases a word may be chosen not only for its meaning but also for the way it sounds (cf. the expression *as snug as a bug in a rug*). More importantly, the speaker knows he can count on the hearer to draw inferences from what he says, and so does not have to express all aspects of the intended message explicitly. Pragmatic strategies can usually be identified, however, by comparison with other occurrences of a sequence in which such inferences are not present.

Thus the proposal to explicate meaning in terms of attitude-conditions rather than truth-conditions seems promising. Attitude-conditions are "those conditions under which an expression is entertained or otherwise held under some propositional attitude" (Saka 2007:5), and introducing them allows the replacement of the truth-conditional schema in (3) by the attitude-schema in (4):

(3) \_ is true = P\_

(4) S thinks \_ = S thinks that P\_

Saka shows that attitude-conditions can handle types of natural-languages utterances which are unmanageable for a truth-conditional theory (e.g. utterances containing connotative expressions, puns, paradoxes, etc.).

Although attitude-conditions are better than truth-conditions, they still treat meaning only on the level of the utterance. This, however, is not the level at which there is a stable correlation between sign and meaning, and so attitude-conditions cannot be taken to be properties of sentences *per se* but may involve situational factors pertaining to the particular circumstances in which an utterance is made. For example, the use of (5) below when speaking to a friend would not correspond to the same attitude as that expressed if addressing a stranger:

(5) You dirty S.O.B.!

This is perhaps not a major drawback in a theory that refuses to objectify the sentence but sees it as an utterance produced by a real live speaker. However, it points to the need to seek a level where there is a stable sign-meaning correlation. The exis-

tence of such a level can be inferred to be necessary given the fact that the linguistic sign functions as an instrument of communication.

Reference to the speaker's thought and attitude thus acts as a healthy although imperfect antidote to the overly idealistic conception of meaning and truth which wrongly objectifies both the sentence (which is detached completely from its utterer) and its meaning (treated as a set of real- or possible-world scenarios). By treating linguistic meaning as a thought conceived by the speaker and reflecting his attitude, it rightly re-attaches the sentence to the speaker and its meaning to the latter's mind. On the down-side, however, this approach runs the risk of making truth something completely subjective. If one adopts the classical definition of truth based on the common-sense notion of correspondence between mind and reality, truth has both a subjective and an objective dimension. It is determined both by reality and, as attitude-conditional semantics rightly brings out, by the thought-content applied to reality by the speaker. Consequently, truth cannot be reduced to a mere state of mind: it concerns the relation between a state of mind and some reality not created by the mind.

What is more, some assertions seem to be intended by their utterer to be non-reflective of the latter's subjectivity. For example, (6) below is meant to correspond to any being inasmuch as it is a being:

(6) A thing cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect.

In this regard, Thomas Nagel (1989:70) speaks of the human capacity to think of an object from the vantage-point of "a view from nowhere," i.e., a conception which is valid for any one at any time or any place. One might argue that a statement like (6), which adopts this sort of stance with respect to reality, still reflects a particular point of view — that of metaphysics. But somehow it seems paradoxical to label such a view 'subjective'. Moreover, the awareness that the way a thing is is not dependent on the way we perceive it also leads scientists to seek to eliminate or diminish subjectivity.

This suggests that there is also a legitimate brand of objectivity. Although one cannot treat a sentence as an abstract object with an abstract meaning but must remember that it is the product of an act performed by a particular speaker with a particular communicative purpose, there are statements which are intended by the speaker to be detachable from his limited, subjective point of view. While the speaker can never see reality from any other perspective than that of a human being, he can abstract away from his individual point of view and seek universal human knowledge. Once again, one could object that this is still a particular point of view on reality, but it is particular only in the sense of being distinct from other possible viewpoints, not in that of corresponding only to a particular individual, as it is aimed at reflecting the properties of the object and not of the individual perceiver.

A fundamental question arises at this point: is this type of objectivity merely an illusion too? It would be if each individual perceived the same object in a totally different way. However the fact that we are able to communicate by means of

language shows that this is not the case. Although communication does not require that utterances be autonomous objects with autonomous meanings, it does require intersubjectivity, both on the level of the mental content attached to the linguistic signs and on that of the ability to draw the same inferences from what is said. This intersubjectivity points to an ability to know reality in the same way as other human beings do, as there is no way to explain the convergence of individual subjectivities otherwise: it would have to be a random phenomenon, a highly improbable chance occurrence — a situation which would render human communication by means of language impossible, whereas we have daily experience of communication as a normal, regularly occurring event.

Saka, on the other hand, proposes that scientific realism is simply the assertion of truth-conditional semantics within a particularly interesting domain, and that “it is rational to retain our beliefs even if they are not justified by any correspondence relation [to reality]” (2007:102). This position is destructive of both science and rationality, however, as well as of itself, for it would imply that it is just as rational to subscribe to truth-conditional semantics as to attitude-conditional semantics, in spite of all the arguments marshaled by the author in favour of the latter. What is at stake here is the tension between subjectivity and objectivity, the relation between the mind and reality. I would like to propose that subjectivity and objectivity are in a correlative, gradient relationship. At one extreme, there are utterances such as expletives, whose main function is to express how the subject feels (but are not totally subjective in that their conventional character is based on the knowledge that other people can feel the same way as the speaker). At the other extreme are utterances such as philosophical or scientific statements, which attempt to abstract away from personal subjectivity and to reflect the way things are. The scientists or philosophers who make such statements remain human nonetheless, and so one must take into account their communicative intention in determining the truth or falsity of what they say. This involves taking into consideration the way the terms they use are defined within the theory to which they subscribe, as well as what these terms are intended to describe or explain. As Artigas (2000:203) puts it regarding science,

... scientific truth combines contextual, semantic, and pragmatic features, which correspond to the theories of truth as coherence, as correspondence, and as praxis. We will meet unsolvable problems if we separate these features. Such problems arise, for example, if we try to establish truth as a correspondence conceived as completely independent of theoretical construction and pragmatic intervention. An interpretation of this kind would amount to illegitimately making scientific truth absolute because the value of our knowledge would be considered as though independent of our concepts, their references, and the real problems we try to solve with them.

The perfectibility of scientific truth is a reflection of the limitations of the knowing subject. However, this does not make such truth purely subjective: just because the human mind is not omniscient does not mean it is incapable of grasping reality and can only express its own attitudes or feelings.

To conclude, one could say that while truth is dependent on meaning, it is also dependent on objective reality. Whether a statement is true or not depends both on what thought-content it has (including what the speaker intends his thought-content to apply to and what he wishes the hearer to infer from what he says) and on the object that this thought-content is applied to. One cannot therefore evaluate the truth of a statement without taking into account the speaker's intentions and the situation of utterance, although some statements are made with the intention of reducing speaker subjectivity as much as possible. Truth-conditional semantics consequently represents the wrong kind of objectivity, in that it reifies both the utterance and its meaning. Attitude-conditional semantics rightly re-introduces the speaker and the thought-content of the utterance into the discussion of meaning and truth. This provides an adequate approach to linguistic meaning, which is concerned with the immediate cause of the speaker's use of certain linguistic signs to express a message. However, by completely subjectifying meaning, it severs the relation between mind and reality, which renders meaningless the question of truth.

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